

1881
MANCHESTER NEW COLLEGE, LONDON.

Address

TO

THE STUDENTS,

DELIVERED AT THE CLOSE OF THE SESSION. 1880-81,

BY

REV. THOMAS SADLER, Ph D.,

VISITOR.

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Theological knowledge without insisting on the adoption of particular
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GENTLEMEN,

When, more than two centuries ago, the two thousand ministers were ejected from the Established Church by the passing of the Act of Uniformity, many of them doubtless hoped that before long the Act would be so far modified as to admit of their return. Meanwhile, however, some of them formed congregations on a basis in which there was nothing to bind the minds and consciences of those who might come after them. The ground thus occupied, temporarily as was supposed, is now the permanent ground on which you find yourselves; and I think you would not quit it for any other that could be offered to you, for it is the only ground on which there can be a truly liberal and comprehensive Church.

In these times, indeed, members of the Established Church often represent its comprehensiveness as one of its especial claims; and certainly when we consider the men who belong to it as its ministers, it does seem to comprehend a great deal of diversity. Whether it is desirable to have an Established Church at all is a question into which I will not enter; but surely the borders of the present Establishment

cannot be properly and effectually enlarged so long as the Act of Uniformity remains. A church founded on this Act *ought* not to be comprehensive;—it has declared its preference in another direction. Multiformity is essential to liberty. Yet while invitations to come in, notwithstanding wide differences, are frequently heard, no attempt is made to remove the stone of stumbling which lies at the very doors. Much stress has recently been laid on the importance of retaining in the Church of England the three divisions already existing—the High Church, the Evangelical Church, and the Broad Church. But then let the Church itself say so; let its basis be widened accordingly; and let not men who really represent the main differences in Protestant Christendom, if not all Christendom, be called upon to sign the same articles, to repeat the same creeds, to conform to the same ritual, and to say the same prayers. Here and there the necessity of a fundamental change of this kind has been fully recognized; as, for example, when Goldwin Smith said, “The Act of Uniformity still lives; but it lives among the graves of its kin, and from all their tombs it hears the memento of mortality. On the tombs of the Tests and Corporation Acts, of the Five Miles Act, of the Conventicles Act, of the Occasional Conformity Act, the Act of Uniformity sees the monitory inscription—

‘As I now am thou soon shalt be,
Prepare thyself to follow me.’”

But hitherto, at least within the Church itself, the spirit of accommodation has been chiefly relied on for the practical extension of its boundaries, and there has been no united and steady effort on the part of any considerable body of men to get repealed an Act which, so long as it lasts, must prevent the Church of England from being consistently broad

or truly national. This being so, it is not without deep satisfaction and warm sympathy that, during the past year, we have seen a distinguished clergyman of this metropolis make the sacrifices demanded of him by his own conscience, and throw in his lot with those who are animated by the spirit of the Two Thousand of glorious memory. So far from the step he has taken being, as one has termed it, an anachronism, the anachronism seems to us manifestly to rest elsewhere.

It may be asked whether, after all, our freedom is not a name rather than a thing,—whether the difference between the so-called free churches and the churches which have fixed creeds and forms, is not really that, in the former, certain beliefs and practices are tacitly taken for granted, while in the latter they are openly avowed? This point of view was set forth some time ago, in a letter by a clergyman in reply to a letter by a highly-respected minister amongst us, who, if my recollection serves me, printed the reply, and, candidly stating his own difficulty in answering it, invited answers from others. The true answer, I think, is in the history of our churches. I do not deny that in them certain things are taken for granted for the time being. It is assumed that a minister would not offer himself as a candidate for the charge of a congregation with which he did not feel himself to be in general accord, and that, if after his appointment his views should so far change as seriously to interfere with this accord, he would resign. But, notwithstanding this, great changes *have* taken place in the course of time without hindrance or objection. When I look back on the history of my own congregation, which was formed two hundred years ago, or more, I find that the opinions held at first were widely different from those which are held now ; but

while there has been no interruption in the general accord between the minister and the congregation for the time being, the exercise of freedom has amply served for the gradual transition to the present state of things ; and I may venture to say that no one has ever dreamt of calling either ministers or congregation to account for not having adhered to the opinions of the founders. The history of the free churches seems to me a complete vindication of the reality of the liberty which they profess to uphold.

Well, then, gentlemen, it is for the ministry in such churches that you are here to prepare yourselves. In the choice which you have made, you cut yourselves off from some advantages which others enjoy. I will not speak of counterbalancing advantages ; for I believe you have been actuated by a simple allegiance to truth. It cannot be otherwise than that the ministers of a small body should have especial difficulties to encounter, and especial deprivations to endure ; but these will not weigh with you, if you have taken up your position from right motives. You will not sigh for the flesh-pots of Egypt in a wilderness which has its Mount Sinai, and beyond which is the promised land.

Already in the course of your studies, you have, I doubt not, found reason to rejoice in the free air which you breathe. While your Professors hold their own views, which they do not conceal from you or from the world, they do not exclude any light which may come to you from any quarter. Content to meet an opponent in the field of argument, they have no wish to confine you to their representation of what he has to say, but leave you to judge for yourselves from his own writings, or from himself. No book is proscribed from which you hope to derive help. No man is denied such influence as your acquaintance with his books or his life may give him

over your minds. The whole world of theological and philosophical study is thrown open to you. You are not tethered to any doctrinal system or ecclesiastical traditions. Nay, you are even *introduced* to the greatest and devoutest men of various schools of thought, that you may profit by their learning and by their point of view, and be quickened by their virtues and their piety. A Scotch Professor of Divinity told me, not long ago, that a generation would pass before one holding his office would be permitted, without strongly expressed objection and active opposition, to lay before his class both sides of questions of doctrinal theology and Biblical criticism. But it is encouraging to know that there *are* Professors of Divinity in Scotland, who *will* set forth both sides, whatever may be the opposition to their so doing, and whatever may be the consequences to themselves.

In order that we may have the full benefit of our inherited freedom, it is well that we should bear in mind what we may hope to gain through it, and that we should avoid mistakes in regard to it. It would be a serious mistake if you were to suppose that you can only show yourselves to be free by never making up your minds, and by disowning all settled convictions. It would be far less important than it is that you should always keep your minds open, if nothing ever came in which would serve as a reliable basis of faith and guide in your conduct. As religious teachers your aim will be, to form and strengthen, in those to whom you minister, the beliefs which are of greatest practical worth to yourselves, and in attaining which you have availed yourselves of that culture which has been defined as a knowledge of the best that has been said or written on the subject in hand. These beliefs will not be fixed in the sense of being final, or in the sense of being unalterable; but they will be fixed in the

sense of being a deep reality to your own consciences and hearts. Doubtless, there may be use in the denials to which you may be led in the exercise of liberty; you may be saved and save others from ignorant superstitions and debasing errors; but the good to be derived from denials is little compared with that which may be hoped for from what you may be enabled to affirm through a free access to the great sources of divine light. Purer and loftier conceptions of God, of moral and spiritual excellence, of the destiny of mankind, and of the methods by which man himself may take his part in working out that destiny,—these are the grand hopes of religious freedom!

Another mistake is that of regarding religious liberty as itself of the nature of a bond of union. It has a larger function than to be that. It is rather a bond of peace and amity amidst separations. Of course, the lovers of liberty have pleasure in meeting with any man who is one with them as to the principle of freedom; but it is of the essence of this principle that it leaves every man to join and associate with those with whom he finds himself most in agreement and sympathy. It says, not "Come with us," but "Go whithersoever you think and feel to be the best, and we respect your sincerity." It may be urged that those who are agreed on the principle of liberty have a point of agreement to unite them. Yes, they are agreed on one point, but they may differ as to the existence of God; and to argue that they should unite because they are agreed on the one point on which they are agreed, would be like arguing that a number of men, setting out on a journey, ought to go in company, because they are agreed that each should take his own way. As to worshipping or working together, a true freedom refuses to put upon us any constraint. It demands respect for the consciences

of others, and that we should not forego the rights of our own consciences. It admits not only the inevitable fact, but also the value, of diversity. It recognizes many members in the one body of Christ, in the one family of God. Union is for those who, for some reason, are especially drawn to one another; freedom is for all. I claim it for the Roman Catholic, though when he gets it he should cut off the entail; and for the Atheist, though he denies the supreme object of my faith. That faith itself requires of me that I should claim for my brethren what I claim for myself. It seems to me that our old centres of religious association are wearing out, and imperfectly represent the real agreements and sympathies of men; and I look forward to the time when some at least of these centres will break up through the formation of a grand Liberal Church, founded on a few simple beliefs and the recognition of vital religion as consisting in a spirit and a life, rather than in the acceptance of any elaborate doctrinal or ecclesiastical system. But at all times, the true liberality will justify and protect every man in seeking fellowship with those with whom he most finds a spiritual home, and by joining with whom he feels that he can do most good.

Another mistake is that of exaggerating the importance of recent gains in knowledge and thought, as compared with the plain practical teachings, which have been and will be the staff of man's inward life. The moral and religious feelings are old, and do not remain to be discovered; nor does the chief food by which they are to be nourished. Nothing new supersedes the necessity of a constant appeal to the sense of duty, and to those affections which unite us to one another, and to God. The God whom we worship is the God of our fathers, and of the old time before them. We cannot find out a new justice or love; but we may ex-

tend the application of justice and love, and in some respects correct it where it has been at fault. When one who had laid much stress on being well abreast of the age, proceeded to say that the Gospel needed in this nineteenth century is the Gospel of honesty, I could not help remembering that this excellent Gospel, much needed doubtless, is still only a third part of what was taught very long ago by a heathen prophet, and preserved and endorsed by an ancient Jewish prophet, viz., that we should do justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with God. So, whenever we attempt to meet practical needs, we find ourselves on trodden ground. The wants of human nature are the same in all ages; and the endeavours to supply them bear a strong family likeness. The sphere of progress is illimitable; but our highest attainments are like the growth of the man out of the child; and the more earnestly we seek the kingdom of God and his righteousness, the more will there be to affiliate us with all the piety of the past.

For "not by eastern windows only,
When daylight comes, comes in the light;
In front, the sun climbs slow, how slowly;
But westward, look, the land is bright."

And now let me say, how important it is for us constantly to bear in mind that no liberty which may be ours, and no light we may gain through it, will of themselves suffice for the work of the ministry. My younger brethren, we must do what we can to supply the deep wants of the soul. No abundance of food we may provide for the intellect will make up for starving the devout affections, which, with the moral nature, are the seat of piety. People will not be content only to ask what is our theology; they will ask also, what is our *religion*? We may show that our theology is

the purest and most enlightened, brought up to the best knowledge of our times ; but this will not do, if those who join us in our religious services find nothing kindling and inspiring in our worship. More than to listen to any learning, or novelty, or eloquence, they want to be made to feel that they can be and do more than they had thought, and to have unseen things rendered clearer to them by what Emerson has called "a beam out of eternity." If, on the Sunday, they find themselves raised out of their ordinary level into their holiest moods, they will come to the House of God, and not go empty away. They may say, as they listen to a sermon, "This is reasonable, this is true ;" but has it the kind of truth, and the kind of life which will help them to fulfil their duties, and to bear their trials, lift them into a diviner atmosphere, bring them nearer to God and their fellowmen, strengthen them to resist temptation, and to do more and better, open to them an ever-ascending path, and give them peace and joy in believing ? It was said of Christ that *grace* and truth came by him ; and he said of himself, not merely that he was the truth, but that he was the *way*, the *truth*, and the *life*. Macaulay made the remark, that men are not willing to attend the religious services of those who believe less than themselves. If, as I have no doubt was the case, he had in view quality rather than quantity, and meant by the expression believing less, "having less faith," I think he was certainly right ; for do we not all feel how good it is for us to have to do with those who have more faith, more hope, more love than ourselves ? When, however, as ministers, we reflect that those who gather around us on the Sunday, come, not simply to hear what we *think* on the great subjects which are brought before them, but also to be quickened by a trust deeper

and clearer than their own, and a sympathy warmer and larger, and aspirations rising higher, the test is one from which it is impossible for us not to shrink. Nor can I hold out to you the prospect that it will become less formidable as life goes on ; for experience, with all its gains, is a stern revealer of weakness, and ideals do not grow easier by endeavours to realize them. Yet there is one comfort we may take to ourselves while we ask, "who is sufficient for these things?" If we have piety enough to yearn earnestly for more, if we have righteousness enough to strive steadfastly after more, if we stand with genuine humility and heart uplifted on a low step in the great altar-stairs connecting earth and heaven, I am persuaded we shall carry our congregations with us,—not every individual perhaps,—but our congregations as a whole. Though they may not be able to look up to us as much in advance of themselves, still if they feel that we are conscious of our own weakness and our own wants, they will be content to go with us hand in hand, and seek together the blessing of the poor in spirit. Next to the inspiration of the prophet is that of the lowly seeker after what is divine, for whom the spirit itself maketh intercession with groanings that cannot be uttered. Not in the happiest moments of confidence and encouragement did Paul ever speak in words of greater power, or brighter omen, than when, in the Epistle to the Philippians, he said: "I count not myself to have apprehended: but this one thing I do, forgetting the things which are behind, and reaching forth to those things which are before, I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus."

And while the sense of our shortcomings will render us anxious to nourish our inward life, not for our own sake

alone, but also for the sake of those to whom we minister, it will have the further effect of leading us to avail ourselves both of the greater and the lesser aids which are accessible to us. That we cannot always be in such a frame of mind as we could wish, is a reason for taking care that the parts of the service which are not our own should be rich in substance. An American friend, comparing two services in which he had joined in London, expressed to me his preference for one, not on account of any greater efficiency in the minister, but because there was in it, as he said, "more of the body and form of Christianity." In this age, in which spectacular religion is much in favour, there are many to whom it seems of no use to show what is true or not true, their chief question being, what do we like? But while avoiding their degeneracy, it is not wise in us to ignore that human beings have senses, as well as sentiments and understanding. Only when spiritual earnestness is more intense than we often find it, can the soul dispense with clothing, and will it so feel itself nearest its source. I would therefore not overlook the æsthetics of piety, or any outward helps, but attend to every detail of worship and work; that the outward may fully express the inward, and that the machinery of the church may be in good working order. Still more should we seek to make up for our personal deficiency, as far as we are able, by bringing those who rely on our ministry into direct communion with men who are far beyond ourselves, the prophets and saints from whom we have derived most help, and who have called forth our deepest reverence; and above all, into a closer personal union and communion with that Infinite Being, who is from everlasting to everlasting the fountain of all goodness and truth.

Gentlemen, it remains only for me to congratulate you

on the "something attempted, something done," during the Collegiate year which has now drawn to a close; and to express the hope, that after a season of needed rest, you may return with fresh energy of mind and heart to your preparation for a work which, if sometimes it almost overwhelm you with its responsibilities, will cause you to dwell more closely with the Father of our spirits, and to trust that your strength will be increased at its inexhaustible source. I need not assure you that you have the sympathy of that religious body which looks to you as its future ministers; and still more of those older students who are gathered together on an occasion of exceeding interest, such as perhaps is hardly likely to occur again in the life of any of us, and many of whom, as they listened to your answers, have been vividly reminded of the days when they occupied the benches which you now occupy, and to which they bade farewell with an affection, a reverence, and a gratitude, that have not grown less with any change of circumstances or any lapse of time. And you have the tenderest, if not also the strongest, sympathy from those of your elder brethren who feel that their work is nearly done, and who look to you to carry it on, and to improve on it,—to trim and hold higher "the torch of life," that it may shine brighter and farther in your hands than it has ever done in theirs.

